An Archive of Feelings

TRAUMA, SEXUALITY, AND LESBIAN PUBLIC CULTURES

ANN CVETKOVICH

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SERIES Q

Edited by Michèle Aina Barale,

Jonathan Goldberg, Michael Moon,

and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

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DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS : DURHAM & LONDON 2003

The distribution of this book
is supported by a generous grant
from the Gill Foundation.

© 2003 Duke University Press
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Printed in the United States of
America on acid-free paper ♾
Designed by Rebecca Giménez
Typeset in Adobe Minion by
Tseng Information Systems, Inc.
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-
Publication Data appear on the
last printed page of this book.
3rd printing, 2008

For my mother,

Valerie Haig-Brown,

and my father,

Joseph Cvetkovich

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Acknowledgments

To put it simply, I have a lot of people to thank. A crucial research leave during 1999–2000 was supported by the University of Texas and the Rockefeller Foundation. Ron Grele and Mary Marshall Clark of Columbia University's Oral History Research Office, where I had a Rockefeller fellowship, were superb colleagues; their introduction to the practice of oral history has permanently changed my scholarship. Before that Diana Taylor and José Muñoz helped me get to New York by arranging for me to teach in the Department of Performance Studies at New York University, an experience—especially my conversations with the students in Trauma Cultures and Feminism and the Public Sphere—that vitalized my project. Audiences at numerous universities, including New York University, the University of California at Los Angeles, Duke University, Dartmouth College, the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at City University of New York's Graduate Center, Rice University, the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, Trent University, Barnard College, and the University of Chicago contributed to my thinking, and I want to thank my hosts José Muñoz, Joseph Bristow, Wahneema Lubiano, Marianne Hirsch, Paisley Currah, Susan Lurie and Lynne Huffer, Kristie Hamilton, Richard Dellamora, Janet Jakobsen, and Kathleen Frederickson. I've also benefited from my association with New York University's Trauma Studies Institute and especially Jack Saul's unexpected enthusiasm for my work.

The process of writing this book has been embedded in a life made richer by circles of friends in many places. My University of Texas cohort includes Phil Barrish, Sabrina Barton, Barbara Harlow, Lisa Moore, Ann Reynolds, Gretchen Ritter, Katie Stewart, and many graduate students, including my dissertation group and those who took my Trauma Cultures course. The experience of living in New York as I moved toward completion of this work remains indelible. I can't imagine having finished without the help of the Faculty Working Group in Queer Theory at New

York University, whose members while I was there included Eric Clarke, Ed Cohen, Douglas Crimp, Carolyn Dinshaw, Lisa Duggan, David Eng, Licia Fiol-Matta, Beth Freeman, Martin Manalansan, Anna McCarthy, José Muñoz, Ann Pellegrini, Chris Straayer, and Patty White. A simultaneously formidable and generous group of intellects, they keep my dreams about academic life alive. Most important of all have been the friends who have taken time to read chapters along the way, often on an emergency basis when I could go no farther on my own. Washington Square Village, my house in Austin, my office at the Interchurch Center, a Pope family house in Dorset, Café Orlin, Pane e cioccolate—I have vivid memories of the places where I had conversations and correspondence with Lisa Cohen about the introduction; Avery Gordon, Irene Kacandes, Anna McCarthy, and Gus Stadler about chapter 1; Lisa Moore about so much of the book, but especially chapter 2; Carolyn Dinshaw and David Eng about chapter 4; my aunt Celia Haig-Brown about chapter 5; and Sabrina Barton, Lisa Duggan, and Patty White about the epilogue. The concept of the "archive of feelings" took shape in a formative conversation with Lauren Berlant in her kitchen. Lora Romero read a book proposal at a very early stage in the process, and I only wish she had stayed around to read more. Chris Newfield remains a true supporter, as do Zofia Burr, Wahneema Lubiano, and Adela Pinch.

Some of my best intellectual inspiration comes from my friends outside academia and the creative worlds that they have built. I especially want to thank the artists and activists who were so generous with their time, materials, information, and encouragement: Moe Angelos, Marion Banzhaf, Lynn Breedlove, Jean Carlomusto, Catherine Gund, Kathleen Hanna, Amber Hollibaugh, Silas Howard, Lisa Kron, Zoe Leonard, Jane Rosett, JD Samson, Carmelita Tropicana, and Maxine Wolfe. The ephemeral archive of feelings includes performances by Tribe 8, Le Tigre, the Butchies, Sister Spit, Bitch and Animal, Toshi Reagon, the Five Lesbian Brothers, Marga Gomez, Carmelita Tropicana, Holly Hughes, Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, and Kiki and Herb that have rocked my world. At the heart of my oral history project was my desire to make personal connections with the activists whose work I was researching; I learned so much from those encounters, and I thank all those I interviewed for their contributions and enthusiasm. And a huge thank you to the girls of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival as well as the co-counseling commu-

nities of Austin and New York for their utopian vision of a world in which love is more important than books. Liz Wiesen gets special mention for talking me through the final stages of writing, forty minutes at a time. My New York posse of Texas exes—Shanti Avirgan, Candy Halikas, and Kay Turner—is the best, and New York is all the more precious because of friends like Dave Driver and Jason Tougaw, Carrie Moyer and Sheila Pepe, Sue Schaffner and Liz Rosenberg, Bob Alotta, Nicole Eisenman, Marga Gomez, Laurie Weeks, Desiree Vester, Marget Long, and many more.

Ken Wissoker has been there since before this book was even conceptualized. I thank him for his support and friendship over so many years. My appreciation also to the readers for Duke University Press, particularly Judith Halberstam, whose thorough and perceptive comments helped me make many crucial revisions.

Parts of some chapters were previously published in different forms. Sections of chapter 2 were published in "Recasting Receptivity: Femme Sexualities," in *Lesbian Erotics,* Karla Jay, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 125–46, and "Untouchability and Vulnerability: Stone Butchness as Emotional Style," in *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender,* Sally Munt, ed. (London: Cassell, 1998), 159–69. Portions of chapter 3 appeared in "Sexual Trauma/Queer Memory: Incest, Lesbianism, and Therapeutic Culture," *GLQ* 2, no. 4 (1995): 351–77. Sections of chapters 5 and 6 were previously published in "Legacies of Trauma, Legacies of Activism: ACT UP's Lesbians," in *Loss,* David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 427–57. A brief section of chapter 7 was published in "In the Archives of Lesbian Feelings: Documentary and Popular Culture," *Camera Obscura* 49 (2002): 107–46.

And then there's Gretchen Phillips, who for over ten years now has loved me passionately and extravagantly. In her perpetual insistence that I follow my heart's desire, she has helped me remember that writing can be a labor of love, and she has given me a constant supply of reasons to love her back.

KEEP ON LIVIN'

You hide inside, so not okay (keep on, keep on livin') What if you remember more today? (keep on, keep on livin') The phone rings but there's too much to say (keep on, keep on livin') You tell them to go when you wish they would stay (keep on, keep on livin') You gotta keep on (keep on livin!)..... Disproportionate reactions just won't fade (keep on, keep on livin') Every dude you see puts you in a rage (keep on, keep on livin') Or stupid shit keeps making you cry (keep on, keep on livin') Your friends are worried you won't tell them why (keep on, keep on livin') You gotta keep on (keep on livin!)..... Look up to the sky sky sky. Take back your own tonight. You'll find more than you see. It's time now now get ready. So you can taste that sweet sweet cake and feel the warm water in a lake (y'know). What about that nice cool breeze? And hear the buzzing of the bumble bees. Just live beyond those neighborhood lives and go past that yard outside and push through their greatest fears and live past your memories tears cuz you don't need to scratch inside. Just please hold onto your pride and... so don't let them bring you down and don't let them fuck you around cuz those are your arms, that is your heart and no no they can't tear you apart. They can't take it away, no! This is your time this is your life and..... (keep on livin!).....

Liner notes from Le Tigre's *Feminist Sweepstakes* (2001) with the words to "Keep on Livin'." Courtesy of Le Tigre.

Introduction

When I first heard Le Tigre perform "Keep on Livin' " at the 2001 Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, it was as though the writing of this book had come full circle, since one of its starting points was a performance by Tribe 8 on the same stage in 1994. In connecting the experience of living with a history of sexual abuse to the difficulties of coming out, songwriters Kathleen Hanna and JD Samson credit as one of their influences the article I wrote about Tribe 8's 1994 performance, an article that formed the nucleus of this book, and they dedicated their Michigan performance of the song to Tribe 8's Lynn Breedlove. Even without those associations, I would have fallen in love with the song because it captures the way that survival is as simple and as elusive as being able to "taste that sweet sweet cake." I hear the insistent refrain of "you gotta keep on (keep on livin!)" as part curse and part celebration; Hanna's cry of "you gotta keep on" sounds like an impossible demand for survival, but when the chorus answers with "keep on, keep on livin'," it sounds like the cheer that can help sustain you. Performed live, the song creates an opportunity for the audience to shout out the words as a group and affirm the many kinds of survival that bring them together. The music helps return the listener to the pleasures of sensory embodiment that trauma destroys: "Cuz those are your arms, that is your heart and no no they can't tear you apart." Unapologetically feminist and queer, Le Tigre supplements their songs with videos and slides projected on a screen behind them to create a multimedia forum for the polemical messages inspired by their political commitments. The combined power of song, visuals, and live performance lends itself to the formation of a public culture around trauma that doesn't involve medical diagnoses or victims.

Performances by bands like Le Tigre and Tribe 8 have been my inspiration here and form the archive in which my own feelings are deposited. Sometimes the most effective way I can explain my project is to point to

work like theirs because it articulates better than I can what I want to say. If I were to "follow the trail of breadcrumbs in my head" (to quote Kathleen Hanna) and try to tell the story of how I came to write this book, I would probably start not with trauma but with depression.[1] Or to use less clinical terms, feeling bad. When I was in my late twenties, I started coming up against the life challenges that sent me to a therapist to explore why I was feeling bad. A major relationship break-up. A shifting sexual identity. A dissertation to finish. These were all equally important problems, since—as is so often the case for academics—my personal life was deeply entangled with my intellectual life. In the process of exploring how my early history might be contributing to my current distress, many therapists suggested that my history of incest was probably at the root of my adult struggles. I was fascinated with this idea since it offered a convenient explanation for why I was depressed (and probably would be for a long time), but I was also skeptical about this magic-bullet theory of sexual trauma.

One reason for my skepticism is that the feminist recommendation to tell my story, whether in therapy or more publicly, did not provide emotional relief or personal transformation. My aesthetic sensibility rebelled against this path; I was afraid my story would resemble a clichéd case history from a self-help book. My intellectual training also threw some roadblocks in the way; I was too steeped in Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis to believe that telling the story was going to make a difference—unless the circumstances were very particular. And even if I managed to circumvent these censors, the story itself couldn't be articulated in a single coherent narrative—it was much more complicated than the events of what happened, connected to other histories that were not my own. I've often been moved by listening to others go public with their experiences, but I didn't know how to tell my own story.

In the wake of this impasse, the trail of breadcrumbs led me to the category of trauma. Intellectual life has been one of my survival strategies, and I frequently find solace in theoretical concepts and debates that situate my own experience in a larger context. Despite the risks involved in taking on a discourse that has been dominated by medical and pathologizing approaches, I have been drawn to the category of trauma because it opens up space for accounts of pain as psychic, not just physi-

cal. As a name for experiences of socially situated political violence, trauma forges overt connections between politics and emotion. Sexual acts, butch-femme discourse, queer transnational publics, incest, AIDS and AIDS activism, grassroots archives—these are some of the sites of lesbian public culture where I have not only found the traces of trauma but ways of thinking about trauma that do not pathologize it, that seize control over it from the medical experts, and that forge creative responses to it that far outstrip even the most utopian of therapeutic and political solutions. I write about these lesbian locations rather than more obvious sites of geopolitical catastrophe classified under the rubric of trauma: war, genocide, the Holocaust. The feelings and events that draw my attention don't necessarily command the national and transnational publicity that such traumas generate. In fact, the kinds of affective experiences that I explore here are lost in discourses of trauma that focus only on the most catastrophic and widely public events. I'm interested not just in trauma survivors but in those whose experiences circulate in the vicinity of trauma and are marked by it. I want to place moments of extreme trauma alongside moments of everyday emotional distress that are often the only sign that trauma's effects are still being felt.

Trauma discourse has allowed me to ask about the connection between girls like me feeling bad and world historical events. To do so, though, has necessitated grappling with an apparent gender divide within trauma discourse that allows sexual trauma to slip out of the picture. Sometimes the impact of sexual trauma doesn't seem to measure up to that of collectively experienced historical events, such as war and genocide. Sometimes it seems invisible because it is confined to the domestic or private sphere. Sometimes it doesn't appear sufficiently catastrophic because it doesn't produce dead bodies or even, necessarily, damaged ones. Although one feminist response has been to argue for the inclusion and equation of sexual trauma with other forms, my hunch has been that its persistent invisibility actually demands a quite different approach, one that can recognize trauma's specificities and variations. Thus, my argument is not necessarily for the inclusion of lesbian sites of trauma within trauma studies or the national public sphere; I am instead interested in how these lesbian sites give rise to different ways of thinking about trauma and in particular to a sense of trauma as connected to the textures of everyday ex-

perience. Moreover, in focusing on cultural responses to trauma, I resist the authority given to medical discourses and especially the diagnosis of traumatic experience as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Although I was interested in feminist approaches to trauma, the solemnity of so much feminist work on incest did not speak to me. I wanted something more than self-righteous anger or hushed tones of sympathy or respectful silence. I found what I was looking for in lesbian subcultures that cut through narratives of innocent victims and therapeutic healing to present something that was raw, confrontational, and even sexy. Much of this lesbian writing about sexuality is working class in origins and has ties to a butch-femme culture that preceded the 1970s women's movement. Making prominent interventions in the 1980s sex wars, it has a combative relation to feminist efforts to prescribe a correct sexuality. When Amber Hollibaugh talks about "dangerous desires," or Joan Nestle describes the power of vulnerability, or Leslie Feinberg and Cherríe Moraga write about not wanting to be touched, they celebrate the hard-won experience of sexual pleasure without denying its roots in pain and difficulty.[2] Dykes writing about sexuality and vulnerability have forged an emotional knowledge out of the need to situate intimate lives in relation to classism, racism, and other forms of oppression. Although the backgrounds of these writers were very different from mine, they moved me in a way that no one else had, and I wanted their work to be part of my discussion of trauma and sexuality. Their writings have also been points of reference when theoretical concepts fail me. In Dorothy Allison's bold words, "Two or three things I know, but this is one I am not supposed to talk about, how it comes together — sex and violence, love and hatred. I'm not ever supposed to put together the two halves of my life — the man who walked across my childhood and the life I have made for myself. I am not supposed to talk about hating that man when I grew up to be a lesbian, a dyke, stubborn, competitive, and perversely lustful."[3] Allison is breaking the silence, but she's doing so in a way that is fiercely uncompromising, that doesn't edit out anger, or lesbianism, or complex sexual lives. Moreover, Allison's work circulates within lesbian public cultures that create a collective audience for trauma rather than consigning its representation to therapeutic contexts. These public cultures have taken sexuality out of the bedroom and the intimacy of the couple and made it the focus of col-

lective conversations about S/M, butch-femme, dildos, and more. These public cultures provide a vehicle for discussions of sexual trauma as well.

My thinking about queer trauma has also been indelibly affected by the AIDS crisis, which is another crucial foundation for this project. Whereas my own distress both past and present seemed suspect—too girly, too middle-class, too intellectual—watching my friends die was a much more tangible and legitimate form of suffering. It was okay to feel bad about that. My involvement with AIDS activism also provided a public forum within which to express outrage and sadness and to understand these very personal losses as part of a broader landscape of social problems. But if AIDS gave me a touchstone for sanctioned grief and anger, it also taught me that such legitimacy was not always universally acknowledged. The AIDS crisis offered clear evidence that some deaths were more important than others and that homophobia and, significantly, racism could affect how trauma was publicly recognized. I was not, for example, willing to accept a desexualized or sanitized version of queer culture as the price of inclusion within the national public sphere; I wanted the sexual cultures that AIDS threatened to be acknowledged as both an achievement and a potential loss.

The formation of a public culture around trauma has been especially visible in the queer response to the AIDS crisis. Queer activism insisted on militancy over mourning, but also remade mourning in the form of new kinds of public funerals and queer intimacies. Like the dyke sexual cultures I write about, the AIDS culture that compels me embraces camp, shame, and the perverse and resists therapeutic models of sickness and health. Another touchstone for me has been David Wojnarowicz's shameless representations of cruising and his vision of carrying a dead body to the White House as an expression of public mourning:

> Each public disclosure of a private reality becomes something of a magnet that can attract others with a similar frame of reference . . . I imagine what it would be like if friends had a demonstration each time a lover or friend or a stranger died of AIDS. I imagine what it would be like if, each time a lover, friend or stranger died of this disease, their friends, lovers, or neighbors would take the dead body and drive with it in a car a hundred miles an hour to washington d.c. and blast through the gates of the white house and come to a screeching halt

before the entrance and dump their lifeless form on the front steps. It would be comforting to see those friends, neighbors, lovers, and strangers mark time and place and history in such a public way.[4]

As the years passed, I found that the deaths of my friends stayed with me, and my own experience of AIDS activism made me want to document it before it was lost or misrepresented. As a way of continuing to combine activism and mourning, I turned to the task of preserving the archive of AIDS activism by conducting oral histories with lesbian AIDS activists included here. My desire, forged from the urgency of death, has been to keep the history of AIDS activism alive and part of the present.

In addition to incest and AIDS, a third inspiration has been the history of race in the United States, a history that is inescapably marked by trauma. As a Canadian who is a longtime resident (alien) in the United States, I have been struck by the everyday effects of a racial history that is different from the one I grew up in, and this geopolitical landscape has been more of a point of reference for me than the Holocaust, which although it has been a major influence on this project, was not its starting point. Genocide, slavery, and the many other traumas of "American" history (broadly conceived as a transnational one that exceeds the borders of the United States) are part of its founding and yet have too often been ignored and forgotten, especially as trauma. I would like to see encounters with the traumatic past forge a path between a debilitating descent into pain and the denial of it. The challenge is that these national traumas are buried more deeply in the past than the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and other geopolitical sites of trauma where there are living survivors, and thus they require different theoretical and memorial strategies. At the same time, they continue to haunt the present, and they take surprising forms, appearing in textures of everyday emotional life that don't necessarily seem traumatic and certainly don't fit the model of PTSD. Whether the language of trauma is used or not, the project of investigating racial histories needs to be part of an interdisciplinary trauma studies. Everyday forms of racism, many of which are institutional or casual and thus don't always appear visible except to those who are attuned to them, are among the effects of longer histories of racial trauma. This insight has been a crucial resource for me in tracking the diffuse effects of sexual trauma and the connections between catastrophic events and very ordi-

nary ones. I find that the demands of thinking about race in relation to trauma converge with those of thinking about sexuality because both require a method that is alert to the idiosyncrasies of emotional life. Both projects benefit from the queer strategies that have made it possible to collect the strange archive of feelings assembled here.

Archives of Trauma

This book's structure and materials are diffuse. It approaches national trauma histories and their cultural memory from the unabashedly minoritarian perspective of lesbian cultures. Its sites of investigation—lesbian sexuality, migration and diaspora, and AIDS activism, among others—are intended not to constitute an exhaustive survey but to represent examples of how affective experience can provide the basis for new cultures. It is organized as "an archive of feelings," an exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception. Its focus on trauma serves as a point of entry into a vast archive of feelings, the many forms of love, rage, intimacy, grief, shame, and more that are part of the vibrancy of queer cultures.

My hope of making the book's marginal, idiosyncratic, and sometimes unexpected sites relevant to more general understandings of sexual and national trauma is grounded in the conviction that trauma challenges common understandings of what constitutes an archive.[5] Because trauma can be unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation, it often seems to leave behind no records at all. Trauma puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration, giving rise to new genres of expression, such as testimony, and new forms of monuments, rituals, and performances that can call into being collective witnesses and publics. It thus demands an unusual archive, whose materials, in pointing to trauma's ephemerality, are themselves frequently ephemeral. Trauma's archive incorporates personal memories, which can be recorded in oral and video testimonies, memoirs, letters, and journals. The memory of trauma is embedded not just in narrative but in material artifacts, which can range from photographs to objects whose relation to trauma might seem ar-

bitrary but for the fact that they are invested with emotional, and even sentimental, value.

In its unorthodox archives, trauma resembles gay and lesbian cultures, which have had to struggle to preserve their histories. In the face of institutional neglect, along with erased and invisible histories, gay and lesbian archives have been formed through grassroots efforts, just as cultural and political movements have demanded attention to other suppressed and traumatic histories, ranging from the Holocaust, to labor and civil rights activism, to slavery and genocide. Forged around sexuality and intimacy, and hence forms of privacy and invisibility that are both chosen and enforced, gay and lesbian cultures often leave ephemeral and unusual traces. In the absence of institutionalized documentation or in opposition to official histories, memory becomes a valuable historical resource, and ephemeral and personal collections of objects stand alongside the documents of the dominant culture in order to offer alternative modes of knowledge. The intersections of trauma archives and gay and lesbian archives will be explored more fully in a later chapter, but the problem of the archive also frames the book's more general discussion of trauma and its mode of inquiry.

For example, the individual chapters of this book should be understood as working as much to produce an archive as to analyze one. The genres used to advance this book's arguments cover a wide range; they include novels, poems, essays, memoirs, video and film, photography, performance, and interviews. The eclecticism of my materials also stems from the fact that both lesbian and trauma cultures frequently produce minor or experimental genres. Many of these materials are the product of alternative presses, performance venues, film festivals, and other cultural spaces and networks that nurture a fragile yet distinctive independent media. Moreover, even the texts that belong to more traditional and tangible genres, such as the novel or feature-length film, participate in public cultures that include more experimental and ephemeral materials, and they can't be understood independently of them. Anthologies with a mixture of voices and genres render visible counterpublics that haven't produced major novels or films. Performance art persists around the edges of the theatrical world, adapting to small spaces and making the most of the power of a single performer. It is no accident that two of my examples in the next chapter, *2.5 Minute Ride* and *Milk of Amnesia,*

are performance pieces and that both emerge from the crucible of New York's Lower East Side, where performance cultures and queer publics are mutually constituting. Performance is emblematic of the public cultures that intrigue me; with few resources—low budgets and makeshift spaces—it insinuates itself as an alternative to the television news shows, big-budget movies, and *New York Times* best-seller lists that are part of a culture industry increasingly owned by a small number of transnational conglomerates. Queer performance creates publics by bringing together live bodies in space, and the theatrical experience is not just about what's on stage but also about who's in the audience creating community.[6] I am determined not to underestimate the power of such genres and publics. They act as a guard against fears about the displacement of political life by affective life and the conversion of political culture into a trauma culture.

My approach to genre has been inclusive because the resulting range of texts and artifacts enables attention to how publics are formed in and through cultural archives. Cultural artifacts become the archive of something more ephemeral: culture as a "way of life," to borrow from Raymond Williams, or a counterpublic, to invoke recent work on the public sphere.[7] My materials emerge out of cultural spaces—including activist groups, women's music festivals, sex toy stores, and performance events—that are built around sex, feelings, and trauma. These publics are hard to archive because they are lived experiences, and the cultural traces that they leave are frequently inadequate to the task of documentation. Even finding names for this other meaning of culture as a "way of life"—subcultures, publics, counterpublics—is difficult. Their lack of a conventional archive so often makes them seem not to exist, and this book tries to redress that problem by ranging across a wide variety of genres and materials in order to make not just texts but whole cultures visible. In using the term *public culture,* I keep as open as possible the definition of what constitutes a public in order to remain alert to forms of affective life that have not solidified into institutions, organizations, or identities. Like Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, I would like to "support forms of affective, erotic, and personal living that are public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity" because "queer is difficult to entextualize as culture."[8]

My investigation of "trauma cultures"—public cultures that form in and around trauma—means that ultimately this book is not only focused

on texts as representations or narratives of trauma but also concerned with how cultural production that emerges around trauma enables new practices and publics. My claim that trauma raises questions about what counts as an archive is thus connected to a further claim that trauma also raises questions about what counts as a public culture. My goal is to suggest how affect, including the affects associated with trauma, serves as the foundation for the formation of public cultures. This argument entails a reconsideration of conventional distinctions between political and emotional life as well as between political and therapeutic cultures. This book implicitly juxtaposes cultural production and therapy, not in order to dismiss the latter but in order to expand the category of the therapeutic beyond the confines of the narrowly medicalized or privatized encounter between clinical professional and client. By foregrounding cultural approaches to trauma, however, I do seek to counter the assumption that clinical approaches are the only model for responding to trauma. Trauma cultures are actually doing the work of therapy; rather than a model in which privatized affective responses displace collective or political ones, my book proposes a collapsing of these distinctions so that affective life can be seen to pervade public life.[9]

Most of the materials explored in this book are contemporary—a choice driven by the conviction that the study of the present transforms historical methods and is of equal importance to the work of historicizing sexuality as is the study of premodern periods. The chapters on activism and the history of ACT UP/NY, for example, reveal how perilously close to being lost even the recent past is, especially when it includes not only traumatic experience but gay and lesbian and activist histories, which are constantly being erased by resistance and neglect. Using a range of methods, including an experiment in the genre of the oral history interview and its connections to testimony, this chapter engages with the difficulty of gathering even a history of the present and the challenge, even for experimental ethnography, of documenting emotional life. It is my hope that making the history of the present more strange will produce a new sense of how to approach the history of the past.

This book lies between the queer and the lesbian, not quite occupying either category comfortably. Its cultural cases and sites can be described as queer, although using that term alone does not account for the ways in which many of them are specifically marked as lesbian. Yet naming as my

focus lesbian culture does not quite do justice to what are frequently the queer ways in which they occupy that category. In many cases, my materials operate in a critical relation to monolithic or homogeneous understandings of lesbian culture, opening space for sex radicalism, specificities of class and region, or racial differences. For example, the writings of Dorothy Allison, Amber Hollibaugh, and Leslie Feinberg emerge from butch-femme discourses that have been a vehicle for articulating not just sexual differences within lesbian culture but class differences. And the racial and national specificities of work by South Asians such as Shani Mootoo and Pratibha Parmar or Latinas such as Carmelita Tropicana, Cherríe Moraga, and Frances Negrón-Muntaner are underdescribed by the category lesbian. The category lesbian remains only one index of the many cultures and publics within which my examples operate, but it is no less significant for being only a partial description. Thus, rather than presuming a singular understanding of lesbian identity or public culture, this project accounts for a range of public cultures that emerge in relation to trauma. In some cases, these cultures may be exclusively lesbian, and in other cases, lesbian culture may be part of a more diverse public organized around sexuality or ethnicity. This book uses both the queer and the lesbian in order to resist any presumption that they are mutually exclusive—that the queer, for instance, is the undoing of the identity politics signified by the category lesbian, or that lesbian culture is hostile to queer formations. Because the focus is on publics rather than identities, the category lesbian occupies a range of meanings and can be more and less foregrounded within individual cases.

In tracking an archive of trauma, I hope also to forge methodologies for the documentation and examination of the structures of affect that constitute cultural experience and serve as the foundation for public cultures. It is important to incorporate affective life into our conceptions of citizenship and to recognize that these affective forms of citizenship may fall outside the institutional practices that we customarily associate with the concept of a citizen. My investigation of the affective life of lesbian cultures is motivated in particular by my dissatisfaction with responses to homophobia that take the form of demands for equal rights, gay marriage, domestic partnership, and even hate crimes legislation; such political agendas assume a gay citizen whose affective fulfillment resides in assimilation, inclusion, and normalcy. Within the trauma archive that

interests me are the affective lives that counter the clichéd narratives of domestic contentment as well as anxiety, depression, and despair as the paradigmatic American national affects, and the structures of feeling that can bring into being alternative cultures.

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In chapter 1, I survey the theoretical influences that guide the book's approach to trauma. While acknowledging the powerful theories of trauma that have emerged within clinical psychology and poststructuralist theory, I also turn to feminist theory, critical race theory, Marxist cultural theory, and queer theory as resources for a demedicalized and depathologized model of trauma. Discussions of two performance pieces, Lisa Kron's *2.5 Minute Ride* and Carmelita Tropicana's *Milk of Amnesia,* also reveal how catastrophic traumatic histories are embedded within everyday life experience. Trauma becomes the hinge between systemic structures of exploitation and oppression and the felt experience of them.

Chapter 2 argues that lesbian sex cultures can add to trauma theory by juxtaposing butch-femme discourses about sex with a classic text of trauma theory, Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle.* Like Freud's analysis, butch-femme writings create links between trauma and bodily penetration. Femme discourses about getting fucked reframe the relation between trauma and touch, at once acknowledging the traumatic power of touch and embracing it. Butch discourses about emotional vulnerability connect the trauma of physical touch to the traumatizing potential of being emotionally touched. These writings about lesbian sexuality offer new ways of understanding trauma's double status as both physical and psychic, exterior and interior—a paradox that has preoccupied not only Freud but contemporary theorists of trauma including Jean Laplanche, Mark Seltzer, Leo Bersani, and Ruth Leys. In addition to having been crucial to the formation of sexual public cultures, both in the pre-Stonewall decades and in their reappropriation over the last decade, butch-femme discourses provide a vital archive of not only sexual intimacy but trauma theory.

Chapter 3 continues the book's discussion of sexual trauma by exploring lesbian public cultures that have formed around incest. Using Margaret Randall's memoir *This Is about Incest* and Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina* and *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure,* along with perfor-

mances by punk band Tribe 8 and self-help books, the chapter examines lesbian and queer representations of incest that respond to trauma by acknowledging the messy and dangerous dimensions of sexuality as well as embracing shame, aggression, and perversity. The stories and performances it scrutinizes refuse to present the incest survivor as innocent victim and use the public cultures forged around lesbian sexuality as a resource for irreverent, angry, and humorous responses to trauma.

Both chapters 2 and 3 insist that sexual trauma also has persistently national dimensions, whether in the case of Allison using an incest story to incorporate southern white trash culture into U.S. history or Moraga writing about being sexually touched as freighted with histories of racism and colonialism. Chapter 4 addresses trauma as a national category even more explicitly by asking what queer transnational publics reveal about the traumatic histories of migration and diaspora that haunt the construction of the nation. Focusing in particular on queer Puerto Rican diaspora as represented in Negrón-Muntaner's video *Brincando el charco* as well as queer South Asian diaspora as represented in Parmar's video *Khush* and Mootoo's novel *Cereus Blooms at Night,* the chapter considers how queer transnational formations produce creative responses to trauma. The chapter seeks to incorporate the affective life of queer diaspora cultures into the transnational archive of migration as trauma history.

Chapters 5 and 6 take on AIDS, which has been acknowledged as a national and global trauma, but only through forms of cultural struggle that have had to address its close ties to homosexuality and forms of sexuality constructed as deviant or perverse. I focus on activism, but more specifically on lesbian AIDS activists whose role in the AIDS crisis has not always been fully acknowledged. The chapters engage critiques of therapeutic culture as a response to trauma by exploring the affective dimensions of activist cultures in a way that problematizes distinctions between therapy and politics, or between mourning and militancy.[10] Through an ethnography of lesbian AIDS activists, I seek to uncover the emotional histories that lead people to activism and to document the legacy of this activism in the present. Yet this ethnography remains experimental, confronting the limitations of the interview as a way of creating an emotional archive. Chapter 5 explores the challenges of documenting the intimacies of personal relationships and political controversies within ACT UP. Chapter 6

focuses on mourning, juxtaposing the interviews with memoirs by lesbians who have been involved in caretaking. The memoirs show how those on the supposed periphery of the AIDS crisis, who occupy what is so often a feminized role, turn the care of the body and encounters with death into a queer experience. The chapter also considers the ongoing legacy of AIDS activism and how its history continues to pervade the lives of activists.

Chapter 7 looks at the intersections between archives of trauma and archives of gay and lesbian history. Through discussion of grassroots, community-based archives such as the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn and San Francisco's Gay and Lesbian Historical Society, and their more recently developed and more institutionalized counterparts in San Francisco's and New York's Public Libraries, the unorthodox nature of the gay and lesbian archive is used as a way of shedding light on the challenge of creating trauma archives. The chapter also examines how documentary video, in its passionate quest for histories that can provide the foundation for culture in the present, incorporates and transforms archival materials. It explores *Not Just Passing Through,* a documentary video *about* archives and Jean Carlomusto's simultaneously personal and public work in *To Catch a Glimpse* and *Shatzi Is Dying,* which address mortality by remembering her grandmother and her dog, respectively. The particular ways in which new documentaries create affective archives are instructive for the ongoing project of creating testimonials, memorial spaces, and rituals that can acknowledge traumatic pasts as a way of constructing new visions for the future. These queer lesbian archives and documentaries deserve a place alongside Holocaust and war memorials because they make room for the intimate histories demanded by emotion and sexuality.

The book concludes with a brief epilogue that considers how the many representations of the murder of Brandon Teena, including the films *The Brandon Teena Story* and *Boys Don't Cry,* constitute a case of queer trauma in the national public sphere. The epilogue also discusses responses to this book while it has been in progress in order to further consider the value of both lesbian feelings and trauma as the foundation for public cultures.

1 The Everyday Life of Queer Trauma

Sometimes people say we're living in a trauma culture—that it's a time of crisis, and that the crisis is manifest in people's feelings, whether numbness or anxiety, lack of feeling or too much feeling.[1] And sometimes they say that calling it a trauma culture is a symptom rather than a diagnosis, a quick-fix naming of the zeitgeist that misrecognizes a structural condition as a feeling. A significant body of work within American studies has recently mounted a critique of U.S. culture by describing it as a trauma culture. Wendy Brown speaks about identity politics as a politics of ressentiment in which claims on the state are made by individuals and groups who constitute themselves as injured victims whose grievances demand redress.[2] Mark Seltzer writes about a wound culture, describing the cultural obsession with serial killings and other sites of violence that produces a "pathological public sphere."[3] Lauren Berlant develops the notion of an "intimate public sphere," the result of a process whereby "a citizen is defined as a person traumatized by some aspect of life in the United States."[4] In these analyses, U.S. culture's transformation into a trauma culture is a problem, representing the failure of political culture and its displacement by a sentimental culture of feeling or voyeuristic culture of spectacle.

While such critiques of trauma culture have been indispensable for my thinking about trauma as a category of national, and particularly U.S., public culture, I take them in a different direction by exploring how trauma can be a foundation for creating counterpublic spheres rather than evacuating them. I share these critics' concern with the problem of what Lisa Duggan calls the "incredible shrinking public" where attacks on public institutions, ranging from the arts to education to welfare, along with the effects of privatization and globalization have led to severely diminished resources and arenas for public and democratic debate.[5] But I also want to hold out for the presence and promise of cultural formations

that bring traumatic histories into the public sphere and use accounts of affective experience to transform our sense of what constitutes a public sphere. As Berlant suggests, "In the patriotically permeated pseudopublic sphere of the present tense, national politics does not involve starting with a view of the nation as a space of struggle violently separated by racial, sexual, and economic inequalities that cut across every imaginable kind of social location."[6] By contrast, this book and the public cultures it documents *do* take as a starting point "the nation as a space of struggle," seeking to illuminate the forms of violence that are forgotten or covered over by the amnesiac powers of national culture, which is adept at using one trauma story to suppress another. This version of national trauma doesn't always lend itself to media spectacle since it frequently operates in the less dramatic terrain of everyday experience and involves groups of people who make no claim to being representative citizens. Douglas Crimp, for example, writes about the trauma of AIDS for gay men as residing partly in its invisibility as such to the national culture. Even though AIDS has ultimately received considerable attention in the national public sphere, many of its losses, such as unprotected sex, remain unacknowledged or scorned.[7]

Here, lesbian sites of trauma often fly under the radar screen of national public culture. I don't look to Hollywood blockbusters, media events, or national crises such as the Vietnam War or Kennedy assassination; in fact, I resist the way that trauma can be used to reinforce nationalism when constructed as a wound that must be healed in the name of unity. As Kathleen Stewart does in her exploration of Appalachian culture, I focus on a "a space on the side of the road"—locations of culture that often seem too local or specific to represent the nation; as well, I am alert to the way that transnational perspectives challenge the boundaries of the nation as both geographic and conceptual category. In focusing in particular on lesbian public cultures and other related queer sites, I invoke the categories of identity politics that Wendy Brown critiques, but explore public articulations of trauma that don't look to either identity or the state as a means for the resolution of trauma. Refusing any quick-fix solution to trauma, such as telling the story as a mode of declaring an identity or seeking legal redress, the cases that interest me offer the unpredictable forms of politics that emerge when trauma is kept unrelentingly in view rather than contained within an institutional project. I

keep open the question of how affective experience gives rise to public culture rather than operating with any presumptions about what constitutes culture or politics, or their conjunction. My investigation of trauma thus becomes an inquiry into how affective experience that falls outside of institutionalized or stable forms of identity or politics can form the basis for public culture.

In opening with a discussion of trauma as a social and cultural category, this book signals its recognition that trauma is the subject of a discourse that has a history. My use of the term comes from a tradition that begins in the nineteenth century, when the term *trauma,* which had previously referred to a physical wound, came to be applied to mental or psychic distress. Medical anthropologist Allan Young locates the origins of trauma discourse in the phenomenon of "railway shock": the accidents that were the inevitable by-product of the new technology of the train produced in some victims symptoms of nervous distress that had no apparent physical basis.[8] Trauma and modernity thus can be understood as mutually constitutive categories; trauma is one of the affective experiences, or to use Raymond Williams's phrase, "structures of feeling," that characterizes the lived experience of capitalism. Other Marxist theorists, most notably Walter Benjamin, have taken up the category of *shock* as a way of describing modern life, particularly in urban contexts, in an effort to characterize its effects on the senses.

For the most part, though, sociocultural approaches to trauma have been overshadowed by psychoanalytic and psychiatric discourse, not only in the work of Freud but also in the investigations of nineteenth-century researchers, the theories of Freud's contemporary, Pierre Janet (whose theory of dissociation constitutes an alternative to Freud's notion of repression), and more recently, the development of PTSD as a clinical diagnosis. Indeed, psychoanalysis, like trauma, is constituted by the assumption that illness can be psychic, not just physical, and the close affinity and shared history of the two concepts make it difficult to separate them. I seek to resist this tendency, however, by holding on to trauma's historical embeddedness not just in modernity but in a range of historical phenomena, including not only World War I, the Holocaust, and Vietnam but feminist discourses about sexual violence, experiences of migration, and queer activisms. The clinical definition of trauma as PTSD includes a list of symptoms (hyperarousal, numbing, repetition) and a

description of the kind of event that produces trauma—"outside the range of usual human experience" in the case of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders,* third edition and revised third edition (DSM–III and IIIR), or involving "actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity" in the case of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders,* fourth edition (DSM–IV).[9] I treat trauma instead as a social and cultural discourse that emerges in response to the demands of grappling with the psychic consequences of historical events. Defined culturally rather than clinically, trauma studies becomes an interdisciplinary field for exploring the public cultures created around traumatic events. Trauma becomes a central category for looking at the intersections of emotional and social processes along with the intersections of memory and history; it gives rise to what Marita Sturken and others have called "cultural memory."[10]

An exclusively historicist or constructivist approach to trauma will not alone exhaust its meanings or significance, however. Trauma has exerted a powerful hold over cultural theorists because it offers compelling and urgent cases of unrepresentability that confirm the fundamental assumptions of poststructuralist theory. Especially prominent in this respect is the work of Cathy Caruth, who has pointed out that trauma presents an epistemological challenge, standing at the "limits of our understanding" as well as the crossroads of the "complex relation between knowing and not knowing."[11] Caruth's influential definition of trauma as "unclaimed experience" shifts attention away from the specificity of the traumatic event to its structural unknowability. Drawing in particular on deconstructive readings of Freud, Caruth repeatedly emphasizes trauma's paradoxes. With similar results, though using not only psychoanalytic but also Marxist approaches, Mark Seltzer notes that trauma discourse is important precisely because it challenges distinctions between the mental and physical, the psychic and social, and the internal and external as locations or sources of pain. Discourses of trauma serve as a vehicle for sorting through the relation between these categories rather than resolving them in a definition. When trauma becomes too exclusively psychologized or medicalized, its capacity to problematize conceptual schemes, the exploration of which is one of cultural theory's contributions to trauma studies, is lost.

I take a certain distance from Caruth's universalizing form of theo-

rizing about trauma. Her work is quite portable to a range of contexts because of the abstractness of her formulations. By consistently stressing questions of epistemology and trauma as structurally unknowable, she flattens out the specificities of trauma in a given historical and political context. While Caruth does not always acknowledge the historical origins of her work (and resists historicist readings of Freud, for example), her own work is rooted in the texts of Freud and has strong ties to Holocaust studies. Furthermore, Caruth focuses on trauma as catastrophic event rather than on everyday trauma. Drawing on Freud, she uses the example of the "accident" as a way of describing trauma's contingency and lack of agency—a model that may not work well for traumatic histories that emerge from systemic contexts. By contrast, I seek to remain alert to the historical locations out of which theories of trauma arise and the possible limitations of those models for other contexts. This presumption is necessary in order to make room for the category of sexual trauma and the lesbian contexts from which most of my cases are taken—instances that might otherwise seem tangential to a discussion of trauma. Without rejecting the emphasis that Caruth and others place on trauma's unrepresentability, I try to rearticulate that insight through a set of examples that are themselves the locus of new theories of trauma.

A PTSD clinical diagnosis defines trauma as an overwhelming event that produces certain kinds of symptoms in the patient. Poststructuralist theory defines it as an event that is unrepresentable. I want to think about trauma as part of the affective language that describes life under capitalism. I'm interested in how shock and injury are made socially meaningful, paradigmatic even, within cultural experience. I want to focus on how traumatic events refract outward to produce all kinds of affective responses and not just clinical symptoms. Moreover, in contrast to the individualist approaches of clinical psychology, I'm concerned with trauma as a collective experience that generates collective responses. I am compelled by historical understandings of trauma as a way of describing how we live, and especially how we live affectively.

Four theoretical allegiances—feminism, critical race theory, Marxism, and queer theory—each of which offers contributions to and problems for theories of trauma, serve as points of departure for this study. From feminism comes an interest in bridging the sometimes missing intersections between sexual and national traumas, and the sense of trauma as

everyday; from critical race theory, especially African American studies, comes an understanding of trauma as foundational to national histories and passed down through multiple generations; from Marxism comes a dialectical approach to the intersection of lived experience and systemic social structures and to trauma's place in the social history of sensation; and from queer theory comes a critique of pathologizing approaches to trauma and an archive of examples from lesbian public cultures. These theoretical resources have been necessary in order to do justice to a series of cases that never seem to quite measure up to expectations that trauma be catastrophic and extreme; I'm interested instead in the way trauma digs itself in at the level of the everyday, and in the incommensurability of large-scale events and the ongoing material details of experience. Drawing on these theories, I hope to seize authority over trauma discourses from medical and scientific discourse in order to place it back in the hands of those who make culture, as well as to forge new models for how affective life can serve as the foundation for public culture.

Roller Coasters and *Little Women*

When my examples of lesbian trauma culture seem a little too slight or marginal, I remind myself that Lisa Kron approaches the Holocaust in her performance piece *2.5 Minute Ride* by talking about roller coasters and *Little Women.* It's a story about visiting Auschwitz with her survivor father so that he can see the place where his parents were killed, but it's also about how much her father loves to ride the giant roller coaster at the family's annual outing to the Cedar Point Amusement Park in Sandusky, Ohio. Kron talks about being overcome with horror by one of the Auschwitz displays, yet she also describes crying at her brother's wedding in a burst of emotion that reminds her of the women sobbing in the dark during a matinee screening of *Little Women. 2.5 Minute Ride* insists on the queerness of emotional life, documenting unpredictable surges of feeling that fall outside the terrain of the sublime horror of Holocaust testimony or the sentimentality of U.S. popular culture's women's genres.

Like a roller coaster, *2.5 Minute Ride* careens, often wildly, not only between widely disparate stories but between widely disparate affects, taking the audience from humor to traumatic rupture without even pausing for a theatrical beat. Kron stresses the challenge of addressing an audi-

Lisa Kron, performance artist and author of *2.5 Minute Ride.* Photo by Kristina LeGros. Courtesy of Lisa Kron.

ence that comes already equipped with a huge repository of Holocaust representations, which are the product of successful efforts to create a culture around this historical trauma.[12] She painstakingly attempts to avoid some of the affects frequently prompted by such representations, including empty sentimentality and its not-so-distant relation, incapacitating awe. Can a trip to Auschwitz be something other than another version of a trip to an amusement park, where history's terrors are domesticated into safely consumable artifacts and emotions? By juxtaposing stories of these two kinds of visits, Kron forces scrutiny of the limits and inadequacies of the quest for an encounter with trauma, testimony, and the Holocaust that are implicit in trips to both Auschwitz and the theater.

2.5 Minute Ride provokes some of the same questions about sensation as does its namesake, the roller coaster. How is it that extreme sensations, including fear and terror, can be entertaining? Does Lisa's aging and blind father delight in roller coasters out of some version of Freud's repetition compulsion, seeking to replicate extreme terror in order to master it? Or is the thrill one that requires a Marxist explanation of the amusement park, and especially its scary rides, as the utopian domestication of capitalism's industrial technology along with the accidents that are the by-product of speed and novelty? The image of the roller coaster in *2.5*

Minute Ride serves as a cautionary reminder of Kron's desire to avoid representations of horror that serve merely to entertain her audience. The roller coaster is also a resonant figure for exploring trauma, given the centrality of railway travel not only in nineteenth-century discourses of trauma but in memories of the Holocaust.

Challenging stereotypical expectations about the emotional impact of visiting concentration camps, Lisa's biggest fear is that she will feel nothing at Auschwitz, that it will be too structured and too much like a Disneyland-style amusement park for her to be able to get close to what happened to her grandparents. She is also terrified by the responsibility of being a witness to her father's reactions, wondering what will happen if he breaks down and she must comfort him. Witnessing is fraught with ambivalence rather than fulfilling the melodramatic fantasy that the trauma survivor will finally tell all and receive the solace of being heard by a willing and supportive listener. Kron captures the burdens, the everydayness, and also the humor of a witnessing as she and her almost-blind father bumble their way through such material difficulties of tourism in a foreign country as what to eat and how to read signs. In one of her story's most agonizing moments, her father discovers that he has left his eyeglasses inside the camp and they have to go back after closing time to search for them. It's an ordinary and chilling moment simultaneously, exemplifying Kron's attention to the persistence of the everyday in the encounter with trauma.

2.5 Minute Ride's sophisticated approach to the performance of emotion reveals itself in Lisa's experience of being overwhelmed by the emotions she was afraid she wouldn't feel. She says,

> But when I enter the crematorium for the first time in my life I feel horror. Physical repulsion. I can feel my face contort, my lips pull back. In the gas chamber, my father stops to take his 2:00 pill. This breaks my heart. I stand to the side and cry. Hard. I can feel . . . I can feel the bottom. It's clear to me now that everything in my life before has been a shadow. This is the only reality—what happened to my father and his parents fifty years ago.

It's not just the crematorium itself that affects her but the poignancy of her ailing father getting on with the business of survival in the midst of it. Yet rather than following through with the performance of this emotion

or belaboring the sudden shock of an encounter with death, Lisa abruptly interrupts her story. "You know what this looks like already. I don't know why I'm telling you this. Everybody's seen these images. I'm sure you've seen *Sophie's Choice* and *Schindler's List* and the pictures of the bodies and the bulldozers on PBS. It's on every fifteen minutes practically. I don't know why I'm telling you this. I don't need to describe this to you. I feel like a cliché. Ugh." She reminds her audience that stories of the Holocaust now circulate so widely as to verge dangerously on becoming an everyday experience that no longer has the power to affect people.

By refusing to continue in this vein, Kron alerts her audience that *2.5 Minute Ride* is a different kind of Holocaust story, if it is one at all. It is not about Auschwitz, the concentration camps, or even Holocaust survivors; it is about her relationship with a man who is a survivor, but who is also her father. Affectively, *2.5 Minute Ride* gestures at the emotional abyss but won't go there, at least not in the expected way; at the moment of confrontation with the Holocaust's simultaneous unrepresentability and hyperrepresentability, Kron swerves, as though imitating one of the roller coaster's unexpected dips and curves, in another direction. She stresses her father's everyday life: that he shops at the Meijer's superstore in Lansing, Michigan, that he will cook you dinner, and that after exiting from the Mean Streak roller coaster with his terrified daughter in tow, he's ready to ride it again. Kron wants to jolt her audience out of its customary responses, including not only the numbness of no response but also the dutiful feelings of sympathy and horror, in order to confront them with other affects such as humor, the poignancy of everyday life, and the moral uncertainty of her father's claim that he was lucky to have been born a Jew so that he couldn't possibly have become a Nazi. *2.5 Minute Ride* offers unrepresentability not as awe-inspiring but as material necessity. Indeed, the challenge it addresses is how to make room for another kind of story in the face of the hyperrepresentation of the Holocaust and its saturation of the cultural landscape by a proliferation of horrific images. The daughter of the Holocaust survivor faces a dilemma in attempting to document her father's life: "When I try to tell his stories I begin to hyperventilate and I don't know why." By performing the realities of emotions that are varied and that include humor, boredom, and resistance, Kron expands the emotional archive of trauma.

2.5 Minute Ride's unusual approach to affect is especially evident in

its exploration of sentimentality in the story of Lisa's brother's wedding at the Seaview Jewish Center in Canarsie to a woman whom he met online. Just as the juxtaposition of the roller coaster with Auschwitz foregrounded the dangers of sensationalism, this segment uses the wedding to suggest that sentimentality is another kind of popular affect that a trauma culture must circumvent. The critique of the sentimentality of weddings is facilitated by the overt focus on lesbianism and on how Lisa and her girlfriend Peg are subjected to the indignities of being the odd couple at the scene of compulsory heterosexuality. Kron uses humor to gesture at the lived experience of homophobia and its manifestations in family rituals that don't quite know what to make of queer children, even if they don't overtly exclude them. There are no melodramatic scenes of conflict, only the dilemma of figuring out how to explain who your girlfriend is to the friends of the family.

Ambivalent about the wedding, Lisa finds herself unexpectedly crying, responding in spite of herself to the moment when her parents walk her brother to the chuppah. She describes her feelings with reference to one of U.S. sentimental culture's most important texts, *Little Women,* adapted for one of its most important media, the Hollywood film.

> You know a couple of years ago I went to see the movie *Little Women.* And it was in a big theater and there were only about thirty people there and they were all women and were all sitting separately, scattered about in this huge theater. And when Beth dies, all the women in the theater were crying but it wasn't the usual quiet sniffling you hear sometimes in a theater. These women were racked with sobs. All around me I could hear noises like: [Makes huge, hiccuping crying noises]. And that's how I was crying at my brother's wedding.

By making this comparison, Kron opens up the possibility that her response is merely sentimental, but in this instance, the sentimental genre, whether the weepie or the wedding, enables something more. She continues:

> It had never dawned on me in a million years that I would feel anything other than a big, judgey reaction to the whole thing. But when I saw my father all I could see was the soul in this little old man who lost his mother and his father and his country and his culture and it's